

Historic, archived document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Wednesday, January 23, 1935.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

SUBJECT: "How to Fight Bedbugs." Information from the Bureau of Entomology,
U.S.D.A.

-----ooOoo-----

Long ago the English named them "wall-lice" and later "chinchies." In this country, different localities have different names for them. In Boston the common name is "chintz" whereas in Baltimore it's "mahogany flat." In New York one pet name is "red coat," and in the West it's "crimson Rambler." You can take your choice of names, but "call it what you will, it's a bedbug still." All these different titles refer to this one insect that has been a pest of man for thousands of years. Two thousand years or so ago it was bothering the old Romans, and before that it was biting the ancient peoples of Asia. Wherever man has gone, this pest has gone along. Ships are very likely to be infested with it. In fact, they're probably the chief means of spreading it to the four corners of the earth. The bedbug probably came to this country with the earliest colonists. And it's still with us.

Well, this bug has such a reputation that most people shy from even mentioning its name. And most housekeepers feel they're disgraced if they ever admit having seen one of the tribe, much less having one in their household. But the entomologists, who have made a study of household insects, say that finding a bedbug is no disgrace, but keeping one is. You see, these insects can get into houses in many ways through no fault of the housekeeper. They've been acquainted with man so long that they know his ways, so they're apt to get into the luggage of travelers or into baskets of laundry and thus be carried into your home. And they're quite capable of migrating from one house or apartment to another via walls or water pipes or other means of entrance.

This wise old bug gives so much trouble not only because it knows man's ways but also because it is so persistent. Once you find him established in your home, you may just as well prepare for a long and vigorous campaign. Otherwise you'll never be sure that every member of his family is vanquished. And even if you've been spared the unpleasant experience of meeting this pest so far -- well, you never can tell when he may come around. It's just as well to understand him in advance, and to know what your own government entomologists advise as the best methods of warfare against him.

First, a few details about the life of the bedbug. To begin with, he's fond of night life -- or, as the scientists put it, "he is normally nocturnal in his habits." He probably learned long ago that he'd live longer and more comfortably if he preyed on human beings during their sleep. So daytime is naptime for the bedbug. But he doesn't intend to have you catch him napping, so he's very clever about concealing himself. Only when he's very hungry will he brave the light, then he'll come out even in a brightly-lighted room; he'll even attack human beings in broad daylight, so keeping the light burning at night is no protection. Once filled up on a good meal of human blood, he'll go in

hiding -- in cracks in the bedstead, or behind the woodwork, or under loose wall paper. There's where the bedbug sheds his skin. And there's where his white oval-shaped eggs are laid and where his young hatch. Of course, the bedbug thrives best in filth. He's particularly happy in old buildings full of cracks and crevices where he can hide.

The bedbug likes a moderate temperature. He's most lively and prosperous when the thermometer is registering between sixty and ninety degrees F. He's extremely sensitive to much heat; in fact, a temperature above ninety-six is likely to be fatal. A temperature of 113 degrees F. will kill the newly hatched bugs and eggs in a few minutes. Older bugs may perish with even less heat, -- anywhere above 96 degrees. So one means of exterminating bedbugs is to super-heat a house. In summer, for example, you can shut the house up tight and start a big furnace fire going for the day. That's a cheap and easy means of ending bedbug trouble.

But that's only one possible means of dealing with these insects. Probably the most efficient remedy is to fumigate the house or room with hydrocyanic-acid gas. This gas penetrates every crevice and immediately ends the life of every bug and egg. But it has certain disadvantages. In the first place, it's deadly poisonous to human beings as well as bugs. So it means vacating the house and having an expert to do the fumigating job. And it's expensive.

Fumigating with sulphur is less dangerous and costs less, but sulphur fumes are likely to damage household furnishings, wall-paper, curtains, rugs and so on, as well as any metal in the house. Also sulphur fumes are a fire risk.

Finally, you can often clean out bedbugs very well yourself by spraying a good insecticide in all places where they hide. You can use a hand sprayer and spray these places with kerosene, benzene or any of the lighter petroleum oils. But in using these inflammable substances, be careful to avoid trouble from fire. Treat all cracks and crevices in the walls and spray behind loose wall paper and all open places back of baseboards and picture molding. Spray the bedstead and springs. Go over the mattress especially carefully, dosing every seam and space beneath tuftings. Inspect beds and bedding every day for a week. And at the end of ten days repeat the spraying whether you've seen any bugs or not. If you can use hot water without danger of damaging furniture, you'll find this a good method of destroying both eggs and bugs.

To sum up this matter of fighting the bedbugs, the scientists say that the three methods most likely to win the day are: First, fumigation by an expert with poisonous hydrocyanic-acid gas, or fumigation with burning sulphur; second, heating the house for a day to a very high temperature; and third, an intensive ten-day campaign of cleaning and spraying.

The methods that have been tried out and found unsuccessful are insect powder -- because it doesn't reach all places where the bugs can hide, and fumigation with formalin or the vapors of benzene, naphthalene or camphor.

